

THE MISSION

Stripe, Fold, Pleat: Notes on the “Soft” Paintings of Jean Alexander Frater

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In the late 1940s, Lucio Fontana began slashing the surfaces of his canvases with a knife—a gesture that was simultaneously physical and metaphysical in nature, aimed at opening up the two-dimensional picture plane onto three-dimensional space. Fontana viewed his paintings not as surfaces for the enactment of pictorial illusion, but as multi-dimensional fields in which space—or rather, a “spatial concept” (*Concetto spaziale*)—is manifested through a seamless unity of color, shape, surface, support, and human perception. Fontana’s *Spazialismo*/Spatialist Movement inspired numerous artists who came after him, like Agostino Bonalumi (Italian, 1935–2013), whose sheath-like “extroflexions” explored the plastic potential of painting’s structural supports, and Jef Verheyen (Belgian, 1932-1984), a painter who used an extremely wide bristle brush to efface any signs of brushwork from his luminously glazed color fields, so that they seemed to subtly levitate off the canvas.

Jean Alexander Frater is interested in making full-bodied paintings that function as spatial and temporal events rather than illusionistic surfaces. But her process differs from those of her predecessors in a few telling ways. Compare, for example, the central element in Alexander Frater’s painting *Green Fold Cut* to the slits in any of Fontana’s numerous *Concetti spaziali*. Where Fontana would cut, Alexander Frater folds. Bonalumi’s extroflexions and Fontana’s slashed planes required their canvases to be as smooth and taut as army cots. Alexander Frater’s works also need varying degrees of tension to hold their shape, as the smartly tailored painting *Green Stripes Event* makes clear, but her use of pleats and folds (formed by the artist’s hands, not a steam iron) suggest a more responsive pliability than Fontana’s sharply delineated cuts and Bonalumi’s protruding pressure points do, along with a wry acknowledgement that intentional gestures only go so far: gravity and the unexpected will inevitably play roles too.

Alexander Frater’s folds break the fictitious barrier between two and three dimensions by expanding the surface plane’s volume. Rather than choosing to “go large” and colonize more visual space by increasing the outer dimensions of her works, Alexander Frater goes soft, manipulating excess surface volume as both a sculptural and painterly material. Her folds disrupt the smoothness, regularity and recti-linearity of the picture plane, playfully transforming hard-edged stripes into ripples (as in *Pink to Orange Striped Folds* and *Brown to Purple Striped Folds*) and turning the geometrically bounded lavender, blue and green color field painting *Green to Blue Rippled Folds* into a slyly analog form of glitch art. Folds also allow Alexander Frater to draw lines in space (or in her case, to

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pinch them into existence) without any implements at all—indeed, without using any material other than surface itself.

As spatial concepts Alexander Frater's paintings are compelling because, by being soft enough to fold in on themselves, they can exceed the limitations of any space they occupy. (Think of sweaters in a drawer). This idea may in turn invite broader philosophical meditations on acts of folding, and folding in, as expansive and inclusive gestures that reveal spaces within, behind and beyond the canvas much as a cut does, but without the latter's implications of violence and separation. Alexander Frater's paintings may be "soft," but they're no less incisive because of it.